



On the New Usage of Because

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On the New Usage of *Because* *

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1. Introduction

The American Dialect Society (ADS) announced on January 3, 2014 that they voted *because* as the Word of the Year for 2013. Although the word itself has long been used, a new usage of the word, as exemplified in (1), is emerging.

(1) I cannot go out today because homework.

Sentence (1) conveys a similar meaning to sentence (2):

(2) I cannot go out today because I have a lot of homework.

Canonically, *because* should be followed either by a finite clause (as in (2)) or by an *of*-phrase (e.g. *because of homework*). In (1), however, the word *homework* directly follows *because*. In the press release from the ADS, Ben Zimmer, the society's chair of the New Words Committee, says, "This past year, the very old word *because* exploded with new grammatical possibilities in informal online use,... No longer does *because* have to be followed by *of* or a full clause".

The present article investigates the grammar of the new usage of *because* and considers how it is related to other constructions that *because* appears in. Section 2 investigates the syntactic and semantic characteristics of the new usage of *because*. Sections 3 and 4 describe relations of the target construction with other canonical or existing *because*-clause constructions in terms of inheritance links (Goldberg (1995)). Section 5 wraps up the discussion in the article.

2. Grammar of the New Usage

In this section, I will investigate syntactic and semantic characteristics of the new usage of *because*. The syntactic representation of the relevant part of sentence (1), *because homework*, may be illustrated as follows:

(3) *because* N

Given this representation, one could assume that *because* has been converted into a preposition. The story is not so simple, however. First, not only nouns but also words of various syntactic categories may follow *because*, as exemplified in (4):

- (4) a. [T]he hypothesis is not a scientific fact, because unproven.
 (GloWbE)¹
 b. That feeling you get when you finish an essay and you just want to cry
because yay [.]
 (cited in Carey (2013))²

In (4a, b), the adjective *unproven* and the interjection *yay*, respectively, appear right after *because*. Such elements do not follow a preposition.

Another argument against *because* as a preposition comes from the fact that, as McCulloch (2014)³ observes, pronouns do not or only rarely follow *because*, although other prepositions do not have such a restriction. Compare the following contrast:

- (5) a. I can't go to the party with you. (McCulloch (2014))
 b. ?? I can't go to the party because you. (McCulloch (2014))

McCulloch considers the combination of a pronoun with prepositions in general as fine (e.g. (5a)), but its combination with *because* as “rather weird” (e.g. (5b)). The statistics that Schnoebelen (2014)⁴ provides supports McCulloch's intuition. Schnoebelen counts tweets involving this construction and groups all of the items that have 50 occurrences or more according to their parts of speech.

The result is summarized in the table below:

PART OF SPEECH	EXAMPLE	RATE
noun	<i>homework</i>	32.02%
compressed clause	<i>yolo</i>	21.78%
adjective	<i>tired</i>	16.04%
interjection	<i>omg</i>	14.71%
agreement expression	<i>yeah</i>	12.97%
pronoun	<i>you</i>	2.45%

(Schnoebelen (2014))

Although pronouns are actually used, the count is far lower than for the other categories. Thus, *because* may be followed by words of various syntactic categories, and it should be distinguished from other prepositions. Therefore, the syntactic representation in (3) should be revised as follows:

(6) *because* X (where X is a variable)

Let us now consider semantic aspects of the construction. Sweetser (1990) argues that the meaning of *because*, as with other conjunctions, applies to what she calls the content, epistemic, and speech-act domains. Examples of *because* used in these domains are provided in (7a-c):

- (7) a. John came back because he loved her. (Sweetser (1990:77))
 b. John loved her, because he came back. (Sweetser (1990:77))
 c. What are you doing tonight, because there's a good movie on.
 (Sweetser (1990:77))

According to Sweetser (1990), sentences (7a-c) represent the real-world causality between the two events described, the speaker's cognitive process of drawing a conclusion from his knowledge, and the justification of the speech act embedded in the main clause, respectively. Hence, *because* as a subordinate

conjunction “is triply polysemous” (Sweetser (1990:82)).

Interestingly, the survey I conducted suggests that *because* in the new usage seems not to be triply polysemous.⁵ Observe the following examples:

- (8) a. He came back because love. (1.71/3.00)⁶
 b. I’m going to bed early because tired. (1.86/3.00)
 c. He loved her, because back. (0.71/3.00)
 d. [Looking at a wet ground] It’s rained, because ground. (0.00/3.00)
 e. What do you wanna do on our first evening, because Paris? (0.57/3.00)

Sentences (8a, b) are examples of content *because* X; (8c, d) are examples of epistemic *because* X; and (8e) is an example of speech-act *because* X. The low scores that examples (8c-e) got in comparison with examples (8a, b) suggest that the construction cannot or hardly be used in the epistemic and speech-act domains. In other words, the new usage of *because* is skewed to the content usage.⁷

In this connection, it should also be noted that as far as the present argument is concerned, the distinction between the epistemic and speech-act domains is not crucial. Kanetani (2008) postulate the reasoning *because*-clause construction, integrating Sweetser’s (1990) epistemic and speech-act *because*-clauses, and distinguishes it from the causal *because*-clause construction (cf. Nakau (1994), Hirose (1999)). Their form-meaning correspondences are given in (9):^{8, 9}

- (9) a. causal *because*-clause cxn: $[[C_2 \text{ because } C_1] \leftrightarrow [\text{a causal relation between } P_1 \text{ and } P_2]]$
 b. causal *because*-clause cxn: $[[\textit{Because } C_1, C_2] \leftrightarrow [\text{a causal relation between } P_1 \text{ and } P_2]]$
 c. reasoning *because*-clause cxn: $[[C_2, \textit{because } C_1] \leftrightarrow [\text{a reasoning process by which to relate } P_1 \text{ with } P_2]]$
 (based on Kanetani (2008))

The C’s in the form-pole and the P’s in the meaning-pole represent “clauses” and

“propositions”, respectively; the subscript numbers indicate the form-meaning pairings. For instance, P_1 stands for the proposition that the C_1 conveys. Once again, in Kanetani’s (2008) framework, Sweetser’s epistemic and speech act causalities can be integrated into one notion, a reasoning process. What is important is the distinction between causal *because*-clauses, which correspond roughly to the content *because*, on the one hand, and reasoning *because*-clauses, which correspond to the epistemic and speech-act *because*, on the other.

From the acceptability squish shown in (8a-e), we may assume that the meaning of a *because* X expression is similar to that of the causal *because*-clause construction, but not to that of the reasoning *because*-clause construction. Thus, the form-meaning correspondence of the new usage of *because*, which I will henceforth call the *because* X construction, may be illustrated as in (10):

$$(10) \text{ } because \text{ X cxn: } [[C_2 \text{ } because \text{ X}] \leftrightarrow [\text{a causal relation between } P_x \text{ and } P_2]]^{10}$$

Note that some grammatical phenomena are sensitive to the difference between the causal and reasoning *because*-clause constructions, and if the *because* X construction is similar to the causal *because*-clause construction in meaning, the two constructions should behave alike. Two of such construction-sensitive phenomena are available to assess the similarity. First, as suggested in (9a, b) above, a causal *because*-clause may appear in sentence-initial position, as in (11a), whereas a reasoning one may not appear in such a position, as shown in (11b):

- (11) a. Because it has rained, the ground is wet.
 b. *Because the ground is wet, it has rained. (Hirose (1991:27))

Another phenomenon sensitive to the constructional difference is the modifiability of a *because*-clause by a focusing adverb that Quirk et al. (1985) call exclusives (cf. Kanetani (2007)). Quirk et al. (1985:604) define exclusives, like *just*, *only*, *simply*, as restricting “the application of the utterance exclusively to the part focused”. Observe the following examples:

(15):

- (15) *because* X cxn: $[[C_2 \text{ because } X] / [Because\ X, C_2] \leftrightarrow [\text{a causal relation between } P_X \text{ and } P_2]]$

Now that it is clear the *because* X construction is comparable with the causal *because*-clause construction both in meaning and in syntactic behavior, the next section will consider how they are related to each other in terms of inheritance links (Goldberg (1995)).

3. Inheritance Relations

In this section, I will claim that the *because* X construction is a schematic construction which instantiates the causal *because*-clause construction. That is, canonical *because*-clauses are specific elaborations of a word in the X-slot of the *because* X construction.

It is particularly important to investigate how the constructions are related, because, as Goldberg (2003:219) points out, “the totality of our knowledge of language is captured by a network of constructions” (cf. also Croft (2007:463)). There are various ways to describe constructional networks. Goldberg (1995), for example, postulates four types of asymmetric inheritance links to capture relations of motivation. She notes that “inheritance allows us to capture the fact that two constructions may be in some ways the same and in other ways distinct” (p.72). For the present purpose, what she calls an instance link (I_I -link, for short) and a subpart link (I_S -link, for short) are helpful. They are defined as follows:

- (16) a. I_I -link is posited when a particular construction is a special case of another construction. (Goldberg (1995:79))
 b. I_S -link is posited when one construction is a proper subpart of another construction. (Goldberg (1995:78))
 (N.B.: an I_I -link always entails an inverse I_S -link. (Goldberg (1995:81)))

With these notions, the inheritance relations between the *because* X construction and the causal *because*-clause construction may be illustrated as follows:

- (17) *because* X cxn: $[[C_2 \text{ because } X / [\textit{Because } X, C_2]] \leftrightarrow [\text{a causal relation between } P_X \text{ and } P_2]]$
 $I_1\text{-link} \downarrow \uparrow I_5\text{-link}$
 causal *because*-clause cxn: $[[C_2 \text{ because } C_1] / [\textit{Because } C_1, C_2]] \leftrightarrow [\text{a causal relation between } P_1 \text{ and } P_2]]$

As shown in (17), the causal *because*-clause construction is an instance of the *because* X construction; the latter construction is subsumed under the former. In the following subsections, I will take a closer look at these relations between the constructions.

3.1. Causal *Because*-Clauses as Instances of *Because* X

To see that the causal *because*-clause is an instance of the *because* X construction, consider example (1), repeated here as (18):

- (18) I can't go out with you today because homework. (= (1))

In section 1, I mentioned that this sentence is similar to sentence (2), repeated as (19):

- (19) I can't go out with you today because I have a lot of homework. (= (2))

Note that in addition to (19), there are other potential clausal counterparts that may correspond to the *because* X expression in (18), such as those in (20a-c):¹²

- (20) a. I can't go out with you today because my math homework is so hard that I'll take a lot of time.
 b. I can't go out with you today because our teacher assigned a lot of homework.

- c. I can't go out with you today because I have to finish my homework first.

In short, causal *because*-clauses, like *because I have a lot of homework*, elaborate what *because homework* tells; those clauses that follow *because* in (19) and (20a-c) are all instances of the actual use of the word *homework* in (18).

3.2. *Because* X as a Proper Subpart of Causal *Because*-Clauses

In the previous subsection, I posited an instance link (I_f-link) between the *because* X construction and the causal *because*-clause construction, claiming that the former construction is an abstract and schematic construction which instantiates the latter construction. As noted in (17), the Goldbergian instance link entails an inverse subpart link. Thus, the argument in the previous subsection entails that the *because* X construction is a proper subpart of the causal *because*-clause construction. In this subsection, I maintain this claim.

To see that the *because* X construction is a proper subpart of the causal *because*-clause construction, observe again the sentences in (1) and (2) (= (21a) and (21b), respectively), where the latter is an instance of the former.

- (21) a. I can't go out with you today because homework. (= (1))
 b. I can't go out with you today because I have a lot of homework.
 (= (2), underline added)

The formal subsumption of the former under the latter is fairly straightforward, as the same lexical item *homework* is shared in both constructs. Not only formally (morpho-syntactically) but also functionally (semantically or pragmatically), the former construction is subsumed under the latter. By saying *because homework* in (21a), the speaker indicates that (at least to him) *homework* plays the most salient role in the proposition that he has a lot of homework, i.e., the speaker uses the word to represent the whole clause that it is used in. In this sense, the PART FOR WHOLE metonymy is at work; the word *homework* in (21a) metonymically evokes the propositional contents that the

underlined clausal counterparts may convey in (21b). Likewise, by saying *because unproven* in (4a) above, where an adjective appears after *because*, the speaker evokes a clausal counterpart, like *because it's unproven*, which contains the adjective as its subpart. Thus, as a first approximation, the *because* X construction (e.g. (21a)) is both formally and functionally a proper subpart of the causal *because*-clause construction (e.g. (21b)).

This is not always the case, however. As observed in section 2, interjections, as well as content words such as nouns and adjectives, may appear in the X slot of the *because* X construction. Observe the following sentence:

- (22) Admittedly, not in the UK yet, *because aargh*! (= (4b))

A causal *because*-clause that may correspond to *because aargh* in (22) does not necessarily contain the form of the word *aargh*. *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* [8th edition] defines the meaning of *aargh* as follows:

- (23) Used to express fear, anger, or other strong emotion (OALD⁸)

Following this dictionary definition, we may construe the meaning of sentence (22) as something like the one given in (24):

- (24) Admittedly, I am not in the UK yet, because something extremely bad has happened.

Crucially, this paraphrase does not explicitly include the word *aargh*. That is, construct (22) is NOT a formal subpart of construct (24) in the way that construct (21a) is formally subsumed under construct (21b). However, as far as the word *aargh* metonymically can evoke the propositional content that a clause can convey, *because aargh* in (22) may be seen as a functionally proper subpart of the *because*-clause in (24), *because something extremely bad has happened*.¹³

In sum, the *because* X construction may or may not be a formal subpart, but must be a functional subpart, of the causal *because*-clause construction.

4. The Subject *Because* X Construction

This section considers the relation of the *because* X construction with the subject *because*-clause construction (cf. Hirose (1991, 1999), Bender and Kathol (2001), Matsuyama (2001), Kanetani (2011)). The subject *because*-clause construction is exemplified by the sentence in (25):

- (25) Just because John is rich doesn't mean that he is happy.
(Hirose (1999:598))

The *because*-clause preceded by *just* occupies the subject position of the negated verb of inference *doesn't mean*, and the sentence describes an inference denial, i.e., the fact that John is rich provides no reason to conclude that he is rich.¹⁴

Not only a *because*-clause but also a *because* X phrase may appear in the subject position, as exemplified in (26a-c):¹⁵

- (26) a. To what extent will court choose to apply its own laws? Just because can doesn't mean they will...don't have to.
(Bryan Sawyers, Workers' Compensation: Fall 2010. "Helping Injured Workers Help Themselves" [online document])
b. Just because summer doesn't mean you've always got to be wearing short sleeved tops.
(www.grabonestore.co.nz/fitted-sleeve-top-with-belt)
c. Just because rich doesn't mean that we don't have...
(simpsons.wikia.com/wiki/The_Mansion_Family/Quotes)

Apparently, this seems contradictory, as the meaning of the subject *because*-clause construction is inference denial, while the *because* X phrase conveys a causal meaning. This is not a contradiction, however. The subject *because*-clause construction may express an inference denial, but this meaning is encoded by the negated verb of inference (e.g. *doesn't mean*) (cf. Kanetani 2011). Kanetani (2011) claims that the *because*-clause in the subject position is rather a causal one, because it is modified by *just*, an exclusive, and because

it may precede the main clause in the complex sentence structure with no semantic change, as in (28):

(27) Just because John is rich, it doesn't mean that he's happy. (Hirose (1991:25))

As discussed in 2, the focalization of a *because*-clause by *just* and its appearance in sentence-initial position both indicate that the *because*-clause in question is a causal one. Kanetani (2011) also observes that *because of* NP, the prepositional phrase replaceable only with a causal *because*-clause, may appear in the subject position (see fns. 7 and 15). This fact further supports the claim that the subject *because*-clause is a causal one rather than an inferential, or reasoning, one.

Given that a subject *because*-clause is a specific instance of a causal *because*-clause, sentences with the *because* X subject, as in (26a-c), are rather what we can, or should, expect, since the *because* X construction is a schema of the causal *because*-clause construction, as maintained in section 3. The inheritance relations among the relevant constructions may thus be illustrated as in (28):¹⁶

(28) *because* X cxn.

I₁-link ↓ ↑ I_S-link

causal *because*-clause cxn.

I₁-link ↓ ↑ I_S-link

subject *because*-clause cxn.

In other words, the subject *because*-clause construction is just a special case of what can be called “the subject *because* construction”, where what follows *because* is underspecified and can be either a full clause, *of* + NP, or a word.¹⁷ Crucially, whatever type of element it is that follows *because*, *because* in the subject position is construed as a causal one.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I have investigated the new usage of *because* from a construction grammar perspective. First, I observed that *because* is not converted into a preposition. Then, I compared the new usage of *because* with its canonical usage and claimed that the meaning is comparable with what Sweetser (1990) calls the content *because*. The investigation of the syntactic and semantic characteristics of the new usage of *because* lead to posit the *because* X construction as the symbolic correspondence of the form of [*because* X (where X is a variable)] with the causal meaning. With this in mind, I also described how the *because* X construction is related to the causal *because*-clause construction. The *because* X construction is an abstract, schematic, construction compared to the causal *because*-clause construction, and the former construction instantiates the latter as a set of possible elaborations of the word slotted in X in the former. As a natural consequence, the *because* X construction is a proper subpart of the causal *because*-clause construction (cf. Goldberg (1995)). Crucially, the *because* X construction is not necessarily formally subsumed, but must be functionally subsumed, under the causal *because*-clause construction. The view of the *because* X construction as a schema of the causal *because*-clause construction is further enhanced by the fact that the *because* X construction may be used at the subject position, since the subject headed by (*just*) *because* is in general a causal one.

There remain questions that have yet to be answered. For example, I did not address the question of how the *because* X construction is different from the causal *because*-clause construction in the present article, as I focused only on their similarity. Constructions with different syntactic representations must be functionally different. Another question is why certain elements such as nouns, adjectives, etc. appear more frequently than other elements like pronouns, adverbs, etc. in the X-slot of the *because* X construction (cf. McCulloch (2014) and Schnoebelen (2014)). These questions may be answered only after investigating the construction's functional aspects more closely. At this point, I leave these questions open for future research.

Notes

- * The present article is based on the papers read at the Colloquium on the Relation between Grammar and Pragmatics II held at University of Tsukuba on July 10, 2014 and at the 8th International Conference on Construction Grammar held at the University of Osnabrück, from September 3-6, 2014. I thank the audience at the conferences for useful comments and questions. Also for comments on an earlier version of this article, I am particularly grateful to Yukio Hirose, who also gave me a lot of comments in the colloquium in Tsukuba. This research was supported in part by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Numbers 25770183, 24320088.
- 1 Corpus of Global Web-based English, developed by Mark Davies at Brigham Young University (<http://corpus.byu.edu/glowbe/>)
 - 2 A blog post to *Sentence First* by Stan Carey (11/13/2013): “‘Because’ has become a preposition, because grammar” (<http://stancarey.wordpress.com/2013/11/13/>); see the blog post for more data.
 - 3 A blog post to *All Things Linguistic* by Gretchen McCulloch (date unknown): “Why the new “because” isn’t a preposition (but is actually cooler)” (<http://allthingslinguistic.com/post/72252671648/why-the-new-because-isnt-a-preposition-but-is>)
 - 4 A blog post to *Idibon* by Tyler Schnoebelen on 01/15/2014: “Innovating Because Innovation” (<http://idibon.com/innovating-innovation/>)
 - 5 I thank Black Grant, Jamie Grefe, and 22 anonymous respondents for kindly cooperating the survey. Special thanks are due to Ayako Ohara for distributing and collecting the questionnaire sheets.
 - 6 7 native speakers out of the 24 surveyed (i.e. about 30%) accept the usage with different degrees of acceptability. The scores at the end of the examples are average scores on a scale of 0 to 3 of acceptability by the 7 respondents; the scores of those who do not accept the usage at all are eliminated from the calculation. Note also that whereas the construction is being used, it is not entrenched, or with introspection, many people still think it unnatural.
 - 7 Note that it is the subordinate conjunction *because* that Sweetser (1990) argues for its applicability to the three domains. In fact, the preposition *because of* cannot be used in the epistemic and speech-act domains (e.g. Rutherford (1970)). Observe the following contrast:
 - (i) a. He’s not coming to class because of his sickness. (Hirose (1992:85))
 - b. *He’s not coming to class, because of his having just called from San Diego. (Rutherford (1970:105))
 - cf. He’s not coming to class, because he has just called from San Diego. (Rutherford (1970:97))

Unlike the subordinate conjunction *because*, the preposition *because of* is applied only to the content domain. So, it is not surprising to argue that *because* in the new usage is used only in the content domain, given that it is a syntactically

distinct element from the subordinate conjunction *because*.

- 8 Following Booij (2010) and Traugott and Trousdale (2013), I use the template as in (i) to represent constructions.

(i) [[F] ↔ [M]]

[F] is short for form, and [M], for meaning. The double-headed arrow between them stands for the symbolic correspondence of F and M. Note in passing that “cxn”, an abbreviation widely used in the construction grammar literature, stands for “construction”.

- 9 There are two types of causal *because*-clause constructions which are syntactically distinct, i.e. (9a, b). Goldberg (1995:67) claims that semantically synonymous but syntactically distinct constructions must be distinct pragmatically. In fact, these two constructions are information-structurally distinct (cf. Hirose (1991), Kanetani (2008)). The difference is not relevant for the present discussion, however. What is important is that a causal *because*-clause may precede the main clause, and so I ignore their information-structural, or pragmatic, difference.
- 10 Technically, P_x (i.e. proposition that the element X conveys) is an odd representation, since a proposition is typically conveyed by a clause, not by a word. For want of a better representation and for the sake of simplicity, however, I use this notion simply to indicate that a proposition conveyed by a clause which functionally and/or formally subsumes the word represented as X. Relations between the clause and word will be discussed in section 3.
- 11 Corpus of Contemporary American English, developed by Mark Davies at Brigham Young University (<http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>)
- 12 Of course, it is impossible to make an exhaustive list of the elaborated *because*-clauses; those listed in (20a-c) are just a few examples of the huge number of elaborations of *because homework*.
- 13 I am grateful to Yukio Hirose and Bert Cappelle, who (p.c.) suggest a possibility of the speaker expressing his emotion by saying *because aargh* in (22), rather than denoting a proposition like (24). If so, the speaker may not necessarily have an intention to communicate the message to someone. Presumably, however, a person who hears the utterance in (22), if any, can understand upon hearing this utterance that something bad has happened to the speaker that made his arrival delayed. Insofar as the hearer can decode the utterance by the word that the speaker uses, the word plays the same metonymic role as what I suggest in this article, on the hearer's (not speaker's) part, in understanding the message. That is, the cooperative addressee understands the utterance expressed via the PART FOR WHOLE metonymy. I explore this possibility in Kanetani (forthcoming).
- 14 As Hirose (1991, 1999) notes, the verb is not restricted to *mean*, although it is used most frequently. He observes that other verbs of inference such as *prove*, *guarantee*, the causative verb *make*, and the copula verb *be*, can also take a *because*-clause subject.

- 15 Kanetani (2011) observes that the prepositional phrase *because of* NP may also be used in this frame, as in (i):

(i) Just because of his dumb mistake doesn't mean you're going to have lights out in Manhattan. (adapted from Kanetani (2011:77))

- 16 Details of inheritance relations between the causal *because*-clause construction and the subject *because*-clause construction are omitted for the sake of simplicity of the argument. For detailed inheritance relations, see Kanetani (2011). See also Hirose (1999), based largely on which Kanetani's (2011) argument is developed.
- 17 A question was raised from the audience at the 8th International Conference on the Construction Grammar as to how *because of* NP, if it encodes a causal meaning, is related to the causal *because*-clause and the *because* X constructions. Speculatively, *because of* NP is a subpart of a causal *because*-clause, but the former cannot be a schema of the latter. A noun phrase or gerundive clause that is a formal and functional subpart of the corresponding clause can follow *because of*, though it seems that such an element cannot instantiate as many clauses as an element in the X-slot of the *because* X construction can. This is particularly prominent when a gerundive clause follows *because of*. Consider example (i):

(i) Because of his wife ('s) being there, I said nothing about it.
(OALD⁸, s.v. *because*)

The gerundive clause in (i) *his wife ('s) being there* is a subpart of the clause *his wife was there*; the former cannot elaborate so many clausal counterparts as can a noun like *wife*, which might appear in the *because* X construction. While I tentatively speculate about a relation between causal *because*-clauses and *because of* NP expressions, a finer-grained investigation is necessary in order to answer the question conclusively.

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